

“Bold Words, Bold Actions”

*Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Luke 11:5-13, II Timothy 1:7, Hebrews 4:12-16

The first passage I am reading today comes from the Gospel of Luke, the 11th chapter, verses 5-13. Jesus has been praying, and after he finishes praying, the disciples say, “Lord, teach us to pray.” First he gives them the words of the Lord’s Prayer. But then he picks up with an admonition for them to persevere in their praying. Listen for how he depicts God as more willing to respond than a sleepy neighbor or even the best earthly parent. *Read Luke here.*

Our second text consists of one short verse from the II Letter to Timothy. The letters to Timothy are meant to give us a glimpse into the wisdom a seasoned spiritual leader in the church would pass on to someone who is being groomed for leadership as well. After giving thanks to God for Timothy, for the mother and grandmother who passed the faith on to Timothy, and for the laying on of hands, Paul encourages Timothy to be bold in his ministry by saying these words. *Read II Timothy here.*

Our third passage comes from the letter to the Hebrews. We call it a letter, but most scholars agree that Hebrews is not a letter at all, but really more of an early Christian sermon, or as the early Christians called it, a word of exhortation. My colleague Tom Long says that the author of Hebrews is a preacher who is addressing himself to a particular pastoral problem in his congregation. Tom says the problem is that, “The congregation is exhausted. They are tired - tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus.”¹ In the brief passage I am about to read, listen to how the Preacher describes what speech from God and speech to God can do. Listen, too, for how he describes Jesus as a great high priest - a mediator between God and human beings. And listen for the type of high priest that the preacher says Jesus is. *Read Hebrews here.*

I want to begin this sermon by asking you to reflect for just a moment on prayer. What do you believe about it? How do you practice it? And what difference does it make in your life?

I suspect no two of us in this room would answer those questions in exactly the same way. Some of us, like the congregation the preacher of the book of Hebrews is addressing, might find ourselves growing tired of keeping our prayer life going.

Some of us may be fresh off the profound disappointment of praying for a loved one to be physically healed, only to have him or her succumb to the ravages of disease.

Some of us, perhaps, may have essentially given up on the practice of prayer outside of coming to church services, except for the occasional table grace, perhaps when the pastor is visiting.

Some of us may begin every morning and end every evening in prayer. Some of us might say that we find ourselves talking to and trying to listen for God right through the day.

Some would point to experiences in which prayer has made all the difference in the world and others might question the efficacy of prayer period. I imagine it's a mixed bag among us.

Whatever our beliefs about and experiences of prayer, it is clear that the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments view prayer as vitally important to a life of faith. This past summer, I preached an entire series of sermons on the Psalms, the prayer book of the Hebrew scriptures. A few weeks ago, in setting the context for a passage from the Gospel of Mark, I noted how the disciples had forgotten to do something very basic. They had forgotten to pray when they were attempting to bring healing to a little boy in need. Today we heard Jesus tell the disciples, in Luke's Gospel, to persevere in prayer - "*ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you*" - trusting that God would give them what they needed. And in the passage I read from Hebrews, we heard the preacher tell a group of Christians who were losing heart and losing energy, "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and grace to help in time of need."

I think that last verse gets to the heart of why and how we should pray and what we can expect from prayer. In that regard, note what we can expect from approaching the throne of grace with boldness. We can expect mercy and grace to help in time of need.

There are all sorts of reasons we might decide to pray, individually or corporately. One is because the Jewish and Christian scriptures, and the scriptures of other religions around the world, take prayer as a given. It's just what you are supposed to do. There's something to be said for that approach, but most of us want a little better rationale than that.

A second, fundamentally flawed reason to pray is because we may believe that God is like a big gumball machine in the sky or out there somewhere else, and that if we just put in enough nickels, dimes, and quarters of prayer, we will get the exact outcome we want. The person we are praying for will certainly get well, the crisis we prayed would be averted, will definitely not come to pass, the gift we want Santa to bring will wind up under the tree.

Now sometimes the gift we want Santa to bring does wind up under the tree. My Mom and Dad are here today. That wasn't the gift I wanted Santa to bring. But it does cause me to remember, how, when I was six or seven years old, I wanted desperately to have a Green Bay Packer helmet and jersey. And lo and behold, they appeared under the tree. You'll have to ask my mom and dad how they cajoled Santa into bringing those gifts.

Sometimes, however, the gifts we pray for don't wind up under the tree. If we approach prayer in this sort of "coins in a vending machine way", we will eventually be disappointed. Now sometimes people we pray for in fact do get physically healed. And sometimes the crisis we pray to avoid in fact doesn't happen. And sometimes Santa does make sure the gifts we want show up Christmas morning. There is nothing wrong with asking for what we want to come to pass to happen, and trusting implicitly that it will. That's faithful. That's trusting. That's good. But we are not ultimately promised that the answer to every prayer will be "yes".

A wise member of this congregation told me not long ago, “There are at least three answers God can give to prayer. ‘Yes, not yet, and I’ve got something better in mind.’” I’ve since come up with a fourth, “I love you, Aaron, but you’ve got to be kidding!” So, the Rolling Stones were right. We don’t always get what we want, but if we try sometimes, we just might find we get what we need.

Which leads me to another reason we might decide to pray. We might decide to pray because, as Roberta Bondi said in response to question about intercessory prayer, and why she practices it, when we can assume God already knows people’s needs,

“It seems to me that one of the aims of prayer is to grow in friendship with God. If this is the case, then let’s consider what constitutes a friendship, and then try to pray in accordance with that. One of the things about friends is that they want the same thing for each other. Not that they necessarily both want ice cream at the same time, but that the well-being of one person is tied to the wellbeing of the other. This doesn’t just mean that God wants what we want, but that we want what God wants out of friendship for God. That is a basis for intercessory prayer. If God’s deepest longing is for the well-being of the world, then God wants the wellbeing of Bosnia (and the Middle East and all the other war torn places in the world), and we pray for that out of friendship with God.”²

Bondi went on to say,

“Another thing about friends is that they speak their minds to each other. When friends don’t tell each other what they have on their minds, it destroys the friendship. This is another ground for intercessory prayer. It doesn’t matter that God already knows everything. For the sake of friendship, God needs us to say what we want. Whether we get it or not is a different matter. You don’t always get what you ask for from your friend -- maybe most of the time you don’t get it - but you need to say what it is you need and want.”³

God is not just a faithful friend. God is a loving parent. So, as Tom Long writes in dealing with our passage from Hebrews about boldly approaching the throne of grace.

“The Preacher wants them to move past fearful prayers, tidy prayers, formal and distant prayers towards a way of praying that storms the gates of heaven with honest and heartfelt cries of human need. He does not want them to pray like bureaucrats seeking a permit but like children who cry out in the night with their fears, trusting that they will be heard and comforted.”⁴

When I was a child, I remember more than once waking up in the night after a vivid nightmare, and having my mom or dad come in and comfort me with words of assurance. Even more than that, because it was more painful, I remember waking up with terrible earaches on more than one occasion. Out would come the heating pad, the children’s aspirin, and the alcohol in the ear to try to dry up the fluid and ease the pain. The throbbing often didn’t go away entirely, but something about having my mother or father respond to it made it better. So it is with boldly approaching the throne of grace with our own needs - and not just our own needs, but the needs of others.

So what can we expect from that sort of bold prayer?

Our passage from Hebrews says that what we can expect is that we will be given mercy and grace to help in time of need. It doesn't say that the outcome for which we pray will always come to pass - but it does say that will be provided mercy and grace to help us in time of need - our own need or other's needs.

Today we are dedicating the prayer shawls that members of our Congregational Care Committee and others have made over this last year. In the past year and a half, scores and scores of prayer shawls have been knitted by people connected to this congregation, and hand-delivered or mailed to people in need of the assurance that God is with them in the midst of a particular time of trial or transition. Sometimes these shawls have enveloped people in times of great joy - as when they've been given to a new mother on the occasion of the birth of twins. But most often they have gone to people who have experienced some sort of illness or tragedy in life. Almost without fail, the recipients of those shawls have expressed great gratitude for the concrete way those shawls, hand-knitted with care, represent the love and hope of God.

Not every sick person who has received one of those shawls has avoided succumbing to their illness. Not one of the grieving people who have been wrapped in a shawl has escaped the harsh reality of their loved one's death. The anxieties of life don't just disappear because you have a shawl in which to wrap yourself as you pray for a child in trouble. But to a greater or lesser extent, what those shawls have provided for people is a sense of the love and presence of God and the care of other human beings. They have given mercy and grace to help in time of need.

Our prayer shawl ministry started in response to someone's bold prayer. Someone boldly approached the throne of grace asking, "*Show me how I can use my gifts and others can use their gifts to be a blessing to people in your name.*" That is an audacious prayer.

In the day or two after Bill Irwin died, I had a couple of people call and ask what they could do to help Faye. That wasn't exactly a prayer - if it was, it was addressed to the wrong person. I get reminded every day that I am not God, no matter how hard I try to take that job from God. But I'm beginning to think that the answer I gave to their query might just have been God speaking through me.

"Go and visit her," I told them. "Take her some brownies or a meal, if you think you have to have something in-hand, but go and be present. You don't have to stay long. In fact, it might be better if the visit is short. But be with her in the flesh. Give her a hug. Be present."

When the author of Hebrews says, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with us in our weakness," he is talking about a Jesus who was Immanuel, God with us in human flesh. He is talking about a God who knows what it is to be human.

Today is our "Anniversary Sunday". On October 8th of 1961, forty-eight years ago this week, this church was born. It was born with a name, *Immanuel - God with us*. It was born with a bold prayer that God would be with us.

Over the course of these forty-eight years we have seen that prayer answered again and again.

† *We saw it in the formation of the Dolley Madison Preschool.*

† *We saw it in early commitment to mission.*

- † *We saw it in people raising questions when we built this sanctuary, saying, “We need to give more money and more time to people in need. We don’t need to spend on ourselves.”*
- † *We saw it when The Meeting House was built, and people said, “Okay, that’s fine, we can build a building, but we have to do something big for other people.” And that’s how the Dreamer Program, the first Dreamer Program, was born.*
- † *We saw it in when a group of our people came together with people from Lewinsville Presbyterian and Temple Rodef Shalom and said, “There are older adults in our community who can’t afford to live here. We need to do something to provide for them.” And Chesterbrook Assisted Living Facility was born.*
- † *We saw it when some people wondered why we weren’t doing more in the area of International Mission, and they worked to make sure we had more global outreach.*

It is my prayer for us that we would always be bold in the throne of grace asking God to give us mercy and grace to help in time of need. There is a lot of need out there in the world. There is a lot of need in here in the church. So let’s be audacious in our prayers. ***Let’s be bold.***

In Jesus’ name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews—Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), p. 3.

² Roberta Bondi, in an online article found at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=302>. The article “Learning to Pray: An Interview with Roberta Bondi” originally appeared in *The Christian Century* March 20-27, 1996.

³ Bondi

⁴ Long, p. 63.